

George H. W. Bush's letter to Bill Clinton was a model of respect and solidarity

What will Donald Trump leave for Joe Biden?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [December 2, 2020](#) issue

THE WHITE HOUSE
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Dear Bill,

When I walked into this office just now I felt the same sense of wonder and respect that I felt four years ago. I know you will feel that, too.

I wish you great happiness here. I never felt the loneliness some Presidents have described.

There will be very tough times, made even more difficult by criticism you may not think is fair. I'm not a very good one to give advice; but just don't let the critics discourage you or push you off course.

You will be our President when you read this note. I wish you well. I wish your family well.

Your success now is our country's success. I am rooting hard for you.

Good luck -

George

(© George Bush presidential library and museum)

An envelope with "confidential" scribbled across it with a Sharpie marker sits in a cardboard box on the shelf in my bedroom closet. The handwritten letter inside is of

special value to me, and I haven't yet brought myself to part with it. Twenty-five years ago, the interim pastor of the church I serve penned this letter to me and placed it in the top drawer of my office desk. When I discovered it on my first day on the job, I opened it to find warm encouragement and wise counsel for what seemed like a daunting ministry assignment facing a young pastoral soul.

Chuck Claus's letter to me won't make it into any history books. His words don't carry the lasting significance of correspondence penned by the likes of Abigail Adams, Winston Churchill, or the apostle Paul. To this day, though, his sentences breathe kindness and respect, which is what all good personal letters strive for.

American presidents have been leaving personal letters behind in the Oval Office desk for their successors ever since Ronald Reagan started this quiet tradition. George H. W. Bush may have left the most striking one of the bunch, made all the more remarkable given his bruising 1992 presidential campaign loss to Bill Clinton. The letter he left in the desk drawer before exiting the White House a final time, reprinted here, is exemplary for its generous tone. In a mere 11 sentences, Bush manages to share respect, display solidarity, express humility, and offer encouragement. "I am rooting hard for you," he writes at the close. Clinton himself has praised this letter on a number of occasions over the years for so beautifully encapsulating the heart and humanity of "Bush 41."

We don't know exactly how Donald Trump will leave his presidency. But continuing this tradition of letter writing at the end, hard as it must be for any president, would be a tribute to the privilege of serving in that high office. The opportunity for Trump to welcome his successor in this quiet way awaits him. And some thoughtful examples of writing pave the way.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A letter in the drawer."